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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, tests in the language arts have focused on the mechanical skills of reading, writing, and spelling. The problems which have arisen because of tests which measure reading and composing ability without ever requiring the child to actually read or compose have been compounded by teachers' tendencies to turn children away from books by giving them exercises in workbooks, by putting them in reading groups according to arbitrary ability levels, and by constantly testing them. A new movement in research, which concentrates on the process of children's learning rather than on the end-products of testing, can hopefully provide solutions to these Problems. Advocates perceive the child not as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge, but as an active seeker and formulator of meaning. Miscue analysis, categorization of children's spelling errors, and interpretation of children's responses to literature are all techniques which stem from this conceptual framework. Teachers who have always taken their lessons from textbooks need to become sensitive to the learning potential in other than traditional educational experiences. (KS)

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BEGINNINGS AND BECOMINGS

[An address given by Dr. Charlotte S. Huck at the Opening General Session of The National Council of Teachers of English at Chicago, Illinois November 25, 1976]

Tonight I want to talk with you about "Beginnings and Becomings." When I chose my theme of "Beginnings" at the San Diego Convention, I was, of course, thinking about the Bicentennial Year and the beginnings of the third century of these United States. Then too as a President from the Elementary Section of NCTE, I wanted to highlight the new knowledge we have regarding the importance of the beginnings of the life of every young child.

I also realized how appropriate this theme would be for our National Convention in Chicago, for this is the place where we began. NCTE was founded in this city in 1911 by a group of 34 English teachers. The new organization grew out of a committee appointed by the English Section of the NEA, a small group which even then was protesting against the narrowness of the system of examination given by the National Board for Uniform Entrance Examinations for College.

Then, too, this is a place of personal beginnings for me. My twin sister and I were born here and grew up in one of the northern suburbs. Here I went to grade school, New Trier High School and Northwestern. This was home for many years and it is always good to come back. Chicago was also my first introduction to an NCTE Convention,

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and I vividly recall the splendor of the Golden Anniversary Meeting held here in 1960.

In doing research on the beginnings of NCTE I was struck by the similarity of concerns voiced by the early leadership and those of today. Teaching situations were very different, particularly when you realize that when NCTE was founded only 15% of the population went to high school and less than 3% attended college! However in the report of their first convention in The English Journal for 1913, Professor T. Baker of Columbia Teachers College commented upon: "The remarkable increase of interest in composition teaching now everywhere manifest and upon the attempts of educators to arrive at measures of value by means of scientific experiment." And in 1976 the Secondary Section voted to designate this the year of composition. Testing so dogged the footsteps of these early teachers that we were born of protest, it seems, fighting for greater flexibility and freedom in the teaching of English than the narrowness of college entrance examinations allowed. Our founders knew even then that the English/Language Arts curriculum inevitably shrinks or expands to the boundaries of that which is to be evaluated. And today the testing tail of the dog continues to wag the whole of the teaching body.

We are not afraid of testing, or accountability or even competency-based education provided the methods of assessment are consistent with and truly measure our goals in teaching. And that of course is the rub. For tests tend to focus on those behaviors which are the easiest to identify and measure and these are usually the mechanical skills of reading, writing and spelling. And so we test children on their mastery

of some 376 sub-skills of word-identification alone, and not on their use of reading in situations that have real meaning to them, or their developing power as readers, or their increasing enjoyment of books.

Not only do the tests measure mechanical skills and test reading comprehension of isolated paragraphs taken out of context, but they frequently don't test what they are purported to be measuring. Deborah Meier[1] in New York has analyzed reading tests to show how much background of experience is required that has nothing to do with the child's ability to read. For example, a 7-year-old is expected to make very precise and special definitions in the following completion test item: "A canoe is _____" which can then be completed by circling either "a kind of boat" or "a kind of ship." Most children of seven have not reached the developmental level of thinking that would allow them to make that kind of subtle differentiation, even if they were able to read the words in the test. Meier also recounts the bewilderment felt by 9-year-olds when she talked to them about a passage designed to test reading comprehension. The selection read: "... By counting the rings inside the tree trunk, one can tell the age of the tree." Meier found that some children conjured up pictures of round golden rings lying inside the tree, put there by God-knows-who once a year on the tree's birthday!

Composition tests are no better, frequently testing students' knowledge <u>about</u> writing rather than their ability to write. In fact, in San Diego, The Executive Committee expressed grave concerns about the fact that the English Composition Test in The Admission Testing Program was a completely objective test purported to measure students'

ability to write without ever requiring them to compose one sentence. We asked that Robert Hogan send a letter to Albert Sims, Vice President of the College Entrance Examination Board recommending that the present objective test in composition must be supplemented by an adequate examination of writing - certainly more than a twenty-minute sample.

If testing was central to our beginnings in 1911, it continues to be front and center in much of our thinking in 1976. It was for this reason that in its first year of existence, SLATE our new committee concerned with developing a program for social and political action decided that it's major priority this year would be "Testing and Accountability." It would seem that we have come full circle in our concerns.

Throughout the whole controversy of testing and the back to the basics movement, I have been reminded of Hans Christian Andersen's well-known fairy tale of The Nightingale. You will recall that it is the story of the Great Emperor of China who was very proud of his beautiful gardens, temples and palaces. When the Emperor of Japan came to visit him he was duly impressed with all that he had seen but he later wrote that nothing had compared to the beauty of the song of the nightingale that he had heard in the garden. Now the Emperor of China had never heard his famous bird and so he demanded that she be captured and brought to his court. When he first heard her sing, tears came to his eyes. From them on she had to remain at the court in a cage. Soon however, the Emperor of Japan sent an exquisite jeweled mechanical bird, far more beautiful than the nightingale and more predictable. "No surprises," said the Court High Chamberlain as he wound it up and the

bird sang one song over and over again. Everyone who heard the bird proclaimed it a marvel, except one poor fisherman who had heard the real nightingale sing. He agreed that the mechanical bird was pretty enough, that its song was a fairly good imitation, but that something was lacking! The real nightingale was banished from the Empire and the mechanical bird was given a place of honor next to the bedside of the Emperor who only played it once a year as the parts were becoming worn. Five years passed and the Emperor lay dying - The real nightingale, who had heard of his suffering, came to his window and sang so gloriously that life surged through the Emperor once again. The bird promised to return to sing to him if she could go and come as she pleased. The servants came in to attend their dead Emperor and were amazed to see him standing at the window, and as he turned to bid them "Good Morning" they heard a bird song in the distance.

In this period of testing and accountability how can we avoid substituting the spurious and artificial for that which is real and natural? Are we as interested in the process of learning as we are in the product? How in truth can we attend to the song of the real nightingale when all are clamoring for a return to the trite but easily testable answers?

Would that we could respond as our speaker tonight, Sir Alec Clegg, did when he was asked the inevitable American question about evaluation of his schools in Yorkshire. Sir Alec, we are told, opened an enormous portfolio of samples of fine paintings, drawings, collages, stories, poems and essays produced by the students in his mining area in the West Riding of Yorkshire and then he added and I quote:

> It is a matter of intense interest to me to watch over a 20-year span; the development of the fundamentals of education as seen not in intelligent tests or reading techniques or history syllabuses, but in the way children dance and paint and write and behave towards one another.[2]

This is teaching that hears the real nightingale's song! It is, I'm afraid, too idealistic for our present pressure cooker educational climate. You couldn't publish those results in the local newspaper; (although you wouldn't be afraid to meet those students on the streets in twenty years.) Our system unfortunately has no provision for long-term accountability. Test scores are king and they must be higher this year than last. And so teachers do what teachers have done for years, they give a high priority to teaching that which is to be tested in the false hope that all students will achieve grade level or above; an impossible task since the norms are based upon the premise that fifty percent of the students taking the test will fall below grade level and fifty percent will fall above. If one school is so fortunate as to have all their pupils test at grade level, it simply means that somewhere else, where the health and social welfare of the students may not be so favorable, there will be schools where almost all of the children will fail.[3]

Is there then no hope, no way out of this testing maze? I think there is and I am tremendously encouraged by a new movement in research that is quietly focusing not upon the end-products of tests but upon the process of the child's response. This group of researchers would look at what children know rather than at what they do not know. They would examine the process of <u>becoming</u>, observing <u>how</u> a child builds his own rules for language, for reading, for writing. Such an approach has

the potential for an educational DNA, a breakthrough in the way we view children and the way in which we teach them.

Based upon the work of Piaget who sees the child as an active participant in his own learning, this approach also draws on the theories of George Kelly, an American psychologists who taught at Ohio State University until his death. Dr. Kelly saw the learner as actively creating his own personal constructs from the cumulative nature of experiences:

> Experience is made up of the successive construing of events. It is not constituted merely by the succession of events themselves.... It is not what happens around him that makes a man's experiences; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of life.[4]

Mary O'Neil has captured the same idea in a poem for children titled:

Imagination

> Imagination is a new idea beginning to grow
> In the warm, soft earth of all we know.[5]

Such a view of learning does not see the child as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with the "superior" knowledge of the teacher or the textbook. Rather it sees the child as actively seeking and making meaning of the world of his experiences from infancy through adulthood.

Research in the area of children's language acquisition proves that the child is constructing rules about the way words are put together. Children can easily give you the plural endings for nonsense words that they have never heard, or they overgeneralize the rules that they know intuitively and create such new words as seen in the sentences "I swimmed yesterday." or "Put my socks on my feets." These are just examples of the way the young child processes the language that he hears to create his own personal constructs of words.

For years we have given children reading readiness tests in which we have tried to replicate the skills required for beginning to learn the task of reading. Children were asked to observe finer and finer details differentiating between the dog with spots and the dog without spots, or the house with the chimney on the left side of the roof compared with one on the right side. Marie Clay[6] of New Zealand questioned what all this had to do with the process of reading and developed a commonsense test titled "Concepts of Print" in which she first gave a child a book and noticed which way he held it for her to read. Then as she turned to the first page of print, she asked where she should start reading and noted if the child indicated the left hand word on the top line of print. On one page the print is written upside down, again she noted the child's reaction. Simply using a real book, she can ascertain what background of experience with books a child brings to the reading task. If the child cannot accomplish the first three tasks she goes no further and recommends much more experience of looking at books, being read to, and dictating his own stories before attempting to read.

The Goodmans'[7] work with miscue analysis suggests that wrong is sometimes right, at least in comprehending the meaning of a sentence. The child who reads "The bears went into the woods for a walk" instead of "The bears went into the forest for a walk" not only shows comprehension of that sentence but determination to make it meaningful. By analyzing children's miscues, teachers shift their emphasis from correcting mistakes to listening to what those errors tell them about the children's strategies for reading, their backgrounds of experience, and the language competence that they bring to the task of reading. Teachers learn far more about the way children are developing as readers, and the ways they may help them, than the results of a reading test would

Read's[8] work with categorizing children's spelling errors also shows that children are bringing their own intuitive rules of phonology to their invented spellings, and while these rules are not standard adult rules, many of them are consistent across children's work and are predictable.

Before imposing our literary frameworks upon children's interpretations of a story, some researchers have been interested in looking at children's responses to literature. When and how do children develop a sense of story? We know that until children reach the concrete operational stage of development, they have a very difficult time in telling a story from a different point of view.[9] In Douglas Barnes' book From Communication to Curriculum,[10] the author describes various ways children use exploratory talk to find meaning in their subject. In the following instance four eleven-year-old girls were each given copies of the poem "The Bully Asleep" by J.H. Walsh, and then told to listen to a recorded reading of it. They were left alone for about ten minutes with the instruction to talk about the poem in any way they liked. Here then is the poem and brief extract of their response:

THE BULLY ASLEEP

One afternoon, when grassy
Scents through the classroom crept,
Bill Craddock laid his head
Down on his desk, and slept.

The children came round him:
Jimmy, Roger, and Jane;
They lifted his head timidly
And let it sink again.

'Look, he's gone sound asleep, Miss,'
Said Jimmy Adair;
'He stays up all the night, you see;
His mother doesn't care.'

'Stand away from him, children.'
Miss Andrews stooped to see.
'Yes, he's asleep; go on
With your writing, and let him be.'

'Now's a good chance!' whispered Jimmy;
And he snatched Bill's pen and hid it.
'Kick him under the desk hard;
He won't know who did it.'

'Fill all his pockets with rubbish-
Paper, apple-cores, chalk.'
So they plotted, while Jane
Sat wide-eyed at their talk.'

Not caring, not hearing,
Bill Craddock he slept on;
Lips parted, eyes closed-
Their cruelty gone.

'Stick him with pins!' muttered Roger.
'Ink down his neck!' said Jim.
But Jane, tearful and foolish,
Wanted to comfort him.

The four girls have been talking for several minutes. Their major concern is whether a teacher would have noticed that a boy had fallen asleep in class.

1. Well the teacher's bound to notice.

2. Yes really...because I mean...I mean if...

3. Or she could have gone out because someone had asked for her or something...she probably felt really sorry for him so she just left him...The teachers do...

4. What really sorry for him...so she'd just left him so they could stick pins in him.

5. Oh no she probably...with the 'whispered'...said 'whispered'...

6. Yes.

7. Yes, but here it says...um...[rustling paper]...oh 'Stand away from him, children. Miss Andrews stopped to see.'

8. Mm.

9. So you'd think that she would do more really.

10. Yes...you'd think she'd um...probably wake...if she would really felt sorry for...sorry for him she'd...

11. She'd wake him.

10. [cont.]...wake him.

12. Oh no!...No, she wouldn't send him home alone...because... nobody's...

13. His mother's bad.

14. Yes.

15. His mother would probably go out to work.

16. Yes he'd get no sleep at home if his mum was there.

17. Might have to...might have to turn out and work.

18. It might be...his mother's fault that really he's like this.

19. Oh it will be...It always is.

20. Look here it says um...'His eyes are...' Where is it? 'His dark eyes cruel and somehow sad.'

21. I think that just puts it doesn't it?

22. Yes.

23. There's always something like that.
[Pause]

24. He's unhappy. [Whispered]

The children's speech seems interrupted, it is not well-organized; and yet by the end of the sequence they seemed to have reached the main point of the poem and appreciated it summing up on the lines "His dark eyes cruel and somehow sad." How many of us would have cut across these girls' efforts to find meaning in the poem with focussed questions which might have prevented their sympathetic response to "The Bully Asleep"?

Similar research is being conducted by Jimmy Britton[11] and his colleagues in England upon the composing process. The point is not to list all of the work that is going on but to help you get a feel for its

sense of direction and commonality in approach. For years we have been told to start where the child is but we didn't have a clue as how to begin. Now we have an increasing number of ways to determine the strategies that children are using to make meaning of their world. Education must help the child in his or her efforts to become.

Such an approach to child learning suggests new ways of looking at children. It demands new ways of teaching and preparing teachers. It maintains that learning should be whole and integrated, not fragmented into bits and pieces, mini-courses or even short-term electives. We need to be with our students, all students over a longer period of time if we would know them and help them begin the process of construing and reconstruing their experiences.

Currently, I am working at Ohio State in one of our four alternative programs for the preparation of elementary teachers. The EPIC Program has been in operation for some six years and while it is slightly different each year, our primary goal is to provide these juniors with three quarters of integrated work in the language arts and child development emphasizing a consistency of approach both in their field experience and in the methods courses that we teach on campus. This is possible since we have worked with almost all of the cooperating teachers at some time either in workshops or Saturday morning classes. This year we began our program with a 2-day outing in our natural resource center in the Hocking Hills some 80 miles from Columbus. One of our goals was to get to know each other well and to break down the psychological distance which usually separates college students and professors. Another goal was to help the students become sensitive to the beauty of their surroundings and to see the integration of the language arts

in all that they did. One of their activities, for example, consisted of finding one specimen, a leaf, an insect, a flower and then sketching it from all perspectives, writing a detailed description of it and then identifying it. Later that evening we sang and read a variety of literature selections. I chose James Moffit's poem "To Look at Anything/ If you would know that thing, you must look at it long..."[12] I also read them my favorite poem "Summons,"[13] by Robert Francis. While we can't all take a class to the woods to read poetry, these poems were perfect for that time and place. The out-pourings of art, poetry and essays from this group of students were matched only by the three who got up before dawn to go down to the river and tape record bird songs. I'm not sure if they heard a nightingale, but I am sure from visiting their classes that they are in the process of becoming real teachers.

I am also working with a group of reading teachers who asked me to teach a course in children's literature. I said I'd be glad to offer them two in-service classes, the first would emphasize language and real experiences while the second would be literature. I knew that as remedial reading teachers they must start with authentic experiences that would require reading and not begin with literature with children who had already been turned off of books. We've taken trips, we've cooked, made corn-husk dolls, propagated plants, made games based on books and explored the reading and language potential in each experience. Last week one of the teachers told about taking six of her boys to the Greenlawn Cemetery. They did gravestone rubbings, saw the Memorial to Eddie Rickenbacher, interviewed the caretaker and came back to school to write of their experiences and find books about Eddie Rickenbacher.

Their teacher said "You know I never knew those children until we went on that trip - I don't think I'll ever have a problem with them again."

Teachers who have always taken their lessons from textbooks need help in seeing the learning potential of various experiences. They need to learn to be open to new experiences themselves. One of the reading teachers was binding a book she had made with great pride last week and she said "I always thought these activities were something extra - something you did after you finished all your other work and they're not - instead they are the real core of what would help children learn!"

Slowly it comes. And as we examine how children become, we as teachers are becoming; never attaining the final answers, but always evolving, always becoming more than we have been before. One of the first picture books for children, The Velveteen Rabbit says it better than I can:

> "What is Real?" asked the Rabbit one day, when he was lying by the side of the old and wise and experienced Skin Horse.
>
> "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"
>
> "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."
>
> "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.
>
> "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."
>
> "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

> "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."13

Isn't this our primary purpose in education?

To help a child "to become" -

To become all that he is capable of becoming -

To educate him for what is real?